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THE
BELIEF IN IMMORTALITY:

Its Physiological origin; its Theological development; its Scientific
decline; its practical effect on the well-being of Human Life.

A Lecture

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

SUNDAY LECTURE SOCIETY,

ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

ON

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, 5th FEBRUARY, 1888,

BY

A. ELLEY FINCH.

London:

PUBLISHED BY THE SUNDAY LECTURE SOCIETY.

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SYLLABUS.

The Discoveries of Science suggest a re-consideration of the doctrine of Man's Immortality: *e.g.*, Colenso on the Pentateuch, — Darwin's Descent of Man.

Historical sketch of the rise and prevalence of the belief in life after death; whence it appears—

1. To have prevailed, and still prevail amongst a portion only of the human race. Illustration from the creeds of the ancient Egyptians, Hebrews, Buddhists, Japanese, and Chinese.

2. To have arisen in times long antecedent to any real knowledge of the Order of Nature, or the Science of Man.

The Theology of death (formulated prior to the attainment of such knowledge) has been superseded by the Physiology of death (formulated on the basis of such knowledge).

Death in the contemplation of theology a penalty, and only a partial termination of human existence.

Theological development of the doctrine of Immortality, with illustrations from 'The Imitation of Christ,'—'Law's Serious Call,'—and the Burial Service in 'the Book of Common Prayer.'

The belief in a life after death has arisen from the constant occurrence of premature death, and the mental faculties being, on the approach of such death, in vigour and activity, hence still desiring continued life, and expecting a future existence. Illustrations from Plato's account of the thoughts of Socrates under sentence of death; Shakspere's soliloquy of Hamlet contemplating suicide; Addison's description of the reflections of Cato about to commit self-destruction; Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress composed in apprehension of premature death in Bedford jail.

Premature deaths in general a direct consequence of Nature's law of over-production of life, discovered by the Geologists, and, as regards human life, by Malthus and Darwin, showing that more human beings are recklessly brought into existence than can possibly live to attain to death through organic decay; the

vast majority of actual deaths being life cut short by various diseases ('*Nature's terrible correctives of redundancy*') occasioned by poverty and privation, overcrowding, intemperance, vice, and breeding from the unfit.

Human intelligence (*i.e.*, a true Sanitary Science) ought so to regulate the multiplication of man as to stamp out premature deaths, with all their attendant diseases, superstition, and misery.

Probability that on the decline of premature deaths the belief in immortality, or the expectation of any future life, would also decline. Illustrations from the Life of George Combe,—the Autobiographies of Charles Bray and Harriet Martineau.

Death in the contemplation of physiology simply the correlative of birth, being the natural end through physical decay of the bodily and mental organs. Death so resulting neither dreadful, nor agonizing, nor suggestive of any further state of existence.

The conclusion of Physiological Science that what is commonly called the soul is simply the functional activity of the living bodily organs, the brain and nervous system, and that on the dissolution of these organs by death, there is nothing left surviving for individual existence elsewhere.

The doctrine of Immortality a matter of sentiment, no scientific proof whatever being found in support of it. Illustrations from the *Phædon* of Plato,—the Analogy of Bishop Butler,—and the views of the eminent authors of the 'Symposium' in the *Nineteenth Century Review*, 1877.

Practical inferences—

1. The dogma of Belief in a future World the source of Religious Persecution.
2. Demoralising effect of the dogma in depreciating regard for our moral conduct in, and improvement of, this World.
3. The great amelioration of mortal existence to be looked for in a general abandonment of the dogma, whereby life on earth would be elevated morally to the duty of happiness, and the happiness of duty, exerted in the service of Man.

Conclusion. The real world beyond the grave.

"THE BELIEF IN IMMORTALITY," &c.

ONE of the interesting incidents of the jubilee of the Queen's reign was undoubtedly the review taken by the intellectual world of the remarkably rapid advance of knowledge, and progress of science during that comparatively brief period; more particularly interesting perhaps to those who had been living observers, and, according to their light and opportunities, earnest students of that progress, throughout the entire half century under review.

Amongst the many productions of the human intellect which manifested that remarkable advance there were two, bearing especial relation to the subject of the present lecture. The one was the late Bishop Colenso's acute and masterly critical examination of the Pentateuch, wherein the previously isolated objections to its historical veracity were marshalled for the first time in such array, as that their immense force became revealed at a glance; for the first time the English nation at large were admitted to behold the sight; to see for themselves the difficulties, improbabilities, and contradictions to the certain facts of modern science, with which these ancient Jewish writings are saturated and incrustated.

The effect of such disclosures upon reflecting minds has been to banish to the domain of fable and myth their account of the specific creation of man from the dust of the ground, and of the woman from the rib of the man, and the fall of himself and all his posterity through eating the forbidden fruit; and the ecclesiastical superstructure of the redemption scheme, based upon the supposed curse, and asserted to have brought immortality to light, was thus deprived of its assumed supernatural and sole foundation.

The human understanding being thus freed from the fetters of the Mosaic genesis, the way was open rationally to consider without preconceived bias the theory of man's origin propounded by the illustrious Charles Darwin in his startling work—'The Descent of Man'—since generally accepted by the scientific world—viz.—that man was not a sudden special creation out of dust, but was the result of a gradual development or evolution, and descendant of the vertebrate animal life then next below him in the zoological series.

I need not now refer more particularly to the discoveries of Charles Darwin, as I recently gave a concise account of them in a lecture entitled—'*An Hour in a Library, in search of Natural Knowledge*'—which is still in print.

These astounding conclusions of science have forced upon thoughtful minds a re-consideration of the doctrine of man's supposed immortality, and they form, to some extent, the groundwork of the following discourse.

It is highly probable, for reasons I shall presently give you, that primitive or early man, so soon as he developed self-consciousness and power of reflection, formed a belief or expectation of a future life after death. This belief would not be, indeed it never has been, to our knowledge, universal, and there are no sufficient records or traces of the earliest human existence to enable one to speak more positively on the subject.

The ancient historian Herodotus, who flourished some 450 years before the birth of Christ, informs us, that the Egyptians were the first people to maintain that the soul of man was immortal. Their mythology taught that after the death of the body the soul entered into that of some other animal, and, after transmigrations and wanderings through a period of 3,000 years, it again entered into the body of a man. Whether or not into its original body is

not shown, but the consummate art and persistent practice of embalming their dead, evidenced by the existence of mummies at the present day, would seem to indicate that the body was intended by them to be so marvellously preserved for the purpose of its subsequent reunion with the soul.

On the other hand, there were nations or tribes, coeval with the ancient Egyptians, who utterly disbelieved in any life beyond life on earth, and in the earlier books of the Bible, undoubted records of the religious beliefs of the ancient Hebrews, we find numerous assertions on the subject, placing such their belief beyond rational doubt. Thus for instance, in the book of Ecclesiastes (iii. 18-22) we read—"That which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them; as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no præminence above a beast. . . . All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again." So in the book of Job (xxxiv. 15)—"All flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust." "As the cloud is consumed and vanisheth away: so he that goeth down to the grave shall come up no more."—(Job vii. 9.) At a later period the Jews seem to have modified such their early belief, and at the time of the birth of Christ, when they had become divided into the three great sects of Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, we read that it was only the sect of Sadducees that disbelieved in the resurrection.

With the classical nations of Greece and Rome the belief in immortality was a very open question; some of the great thinkers, Socrates, Plato and their school asserting it, others, Epicurus, Lucretius, and their followers utterly disbelieving and deriding it. The eloquent Cicero, after considerably discussing and reflecting upon it, being unable to express any very positive opinion.

At the period of the Renaissance in Italy disbelief in

personal immortality became almost general amongst their philosophical writers. The humanists Pomponazzi, Porzio, and Cremonini especially arguing and lecturing in support of the rationalist proposition, that death was the final end of human existence.

At the present day the most numerous portion of the human race, comprising the Buddhists, the Japanese, and the Chinese have no clear belief in any individual future life; the creeds of the Christian and Mahomedan Churches alone dogmatically professing it. As regards the Christian belief, it should be remembered, what some of our modern theology seem desirous of forgetting, that the orthodox belief of the early Christian World was belief in the resurrection of the body, as expressed in the Apostles' Creed—"I believe in the resurrection of the "body"—the Greek original of body distinctly implying flesh, and the great theological authority in the Church of England, Bishop Pearson's learned exposition of the Creed, shows beyond question that it is the material body, and not only the immaterial soul that, according to the Christian Scriptures, is to rise again.

The resurrection of the body is of course, in the contemplation of science, simply impossible. The body, whether buried or burnt, sooner or later, dissolves into its elements, which, in the course of generations, pass into other combinations, form part of other living creatures, feed and help to constitute countless organisations one after another. When the elements of the dead body have been thus actually used up as materials for other purposes, their rising again has become simply inconceivable, even as a stupendous miracle. The future life of an immaterial soul, as distinct from the body, is rather a theory of philosophy than a religious revelation.

But, whatever view is taken of the character of a future life, the belief in question clearly arose in times long antecedent to our present knowledge of the Order of

Nature, and the Science of Man. There was no conception of the real world or Cosmos, or the insignificant size, position, and history of the earth, as they have been disclosed to us through the sciences of astronomy and geology, or of the nature of man, as discovered through the sciences of chemistry, physiology and biology. The natural phenomenon death was, in unscientific times, considered in Christian countries to have been brought about through the sin of Adam, and, according to theology, to be the penalty of such sin. You remember how the idea is paraphrased in the poetry of Milton—

. . . “Man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
“Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
“Brought death into the world, and all our woe.”

We now know, through the teaching of geological science, that death existed in the world for ages before man’s first appearance on the earth, and we have long since exchanged the theological notion of death, as an abnormal occurrence, or as the wages of sin, for the physiological fact, that death is, or, under proper sanitary conditions, would be the end of the natural decay of the organism brought about by time, through the gradual expenditure of its original vital force; and so the theology of death, which was formulated previously to the attainment of scientific knowledge, has been superseded by the physiology of death, which has been formulated on the basis of such knowledge.

The theological idea of death, and a future life of eternal happiness to the few, and eternal misery to the many, has been amazingly developed in ecclesiastical literature. You have only to turn to ordinary books of devotion to see that the contemplation of death, as a terrible event and punishment for sin, was to be incessantly dwelt upon. Death was even pictured to the eye

as a repulsive human skeleton, brandishing a fatal dart wielded by supernatural power, ready to strike without warning at any moment of existence. In such devotional works as—‘The Imitation of Christ’—‘Law’s Serious Call to a devout and holy life’—and the Burial Service of the Book of Common Prayer, the terrors and horrors of death, the fearful valley of the shadow of death, the bitter pains of eternal death, the great day of judgment, and the everlasting punishment of sinners are impressed upon the mind with all the force of sentiment and imagery that language is capable of expressing. And true indeed it is that as life is generally passed and terminated under the miserable conditions of our imperfect civilization, there is some foundation for these superstitious apprehensions and imaginings. For, in our present social state, it cannot be disputed or doubted—

“Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time
“to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut
“down like a flower. . . . In the midst of life we
“are in death.”

Now, before proceeding to consider our subject on the supposition suggested by science, that individual life after death may possibly be an illusion of the human imagination, a mystery of the mind’s own creation, and belief in it destined to decline as science progresses, how, it may be asked, are we to account for the existence of such belief, so widely spread, so devoutly cherished?

Let us see what knowledge we are in possession of to throw light on the enquiry.

Through the discoveries of geological science it is known, that for ages before any trace is found of the existence of man, vegetable and animal life existed on the earth in vast profusion, and superabundance. Through the high geometrical ratio of its increase thousands, not to say millions, of species came into existence as modified or varied productions or descendants of other species that

had apparently become extinct, constituting a physical history of our globe indicating progression in an advancing series of changes; and the vast superabundance of animal life appears from its discovered geological remains to have been kept down by the various animals preying upon and devouring one another. "The fæces of animals in a fossil state, termed coprolites, containing scales of fishes and other remains of prey they had devoured, form," said Dean Buckland, the eminent geologist, "records of warfare waged by successive generations of inhabitants of our planet upon one another, and the general law of Nature, which bids all to eat and be eaten in their turn, is shown to have been co-extensive with animal existence on our globe, the carnivora in each period of the world's history fulfilling their destined office to check excess in the production of life."

Nature's scheme of creation, so far as we get at it from these geological facts, appearing then to be, the production of individual organisms vastly in excess of their means of subsistence, a struggle amongst them for survivorship, or a battle for life, and progression and evolution seem to have been attained by the successive survivals in such struggles of the fittest, or (as Darwin so acutely defined it) by natural selection—such struggles and improvement culminating in remote ages, according to Darwin's luminous theory, in the development and natural production of the human being.

Now, under the conditions of the life I am adverting to, it is obvious that death would be, in the great majority of instances, *violent and premature*. That is to say, it would not take place as the inevitable termination of an existence lived out, and ending at last through gradual organic decay, but it would be cut short by violence, and as the result of the unceasing battle for life.

Man, then, coming into being through the operation of the physical law of over-production of life, the struggle

for existence, and survival of the fittest, would of course himself be subject to that law, and his individual improvement and gradual civilization in the course of generations would be the result of the survival of the fittest of men, and human deaths therefore would be, in the great majority of instances, *violent and premature*. For, though men might not always have preyed upon, and eaten one another, their over-production, in excess of their means of subsistence, would necessitate the premature deaths of the many, in order that the superior few might live. Disease and starvation, 'plague, pestilence and famine,' as well as the violence of their fellow men in warfare or otherwise, would be the means by which such premature human deaths would be brought about.

Now, early reflective man, contemplating his death as about to occur in the very vigour of manhood, when the relish and desire for the pleasures and scenes of worldly life are most keen, when its bounding energies are most active, would almost of necessity come to the conclusion that life, at the time of such death, is both physically and mentally in so unfinished a state, so only half lived out, as to suggest, almost to give evidence by its own intuitions, of its further continuance elsewhere, and thus would undoubtedly originate or be formulated at first the more or less general expectation and belief in a future life, after and notwithstanding such premature death.

Now, the glowing delineations of heaven or paradise, and the terrifying apprehensions of infernal regions, and the sanguine anticipations of immortality, that are met with in theological and other literature, are, as a matter of fact, found to proceed from minds more or less in the fulness of life, and they are not generally found in the reflections of men, who, having lived out their full term of life, are on the eve of death through gradual organic decay.

I can of course only here give you two or three illus-

trations in support of this argument. One of the most impressive is the case of the great Grecian philosopher Socrates. He, when at the height of his intellectual career, was condemned to death by the Athenian Dikastery for alleged irreligious and dangerous political teaching, and thereby corrupting the youth of Athens. It is one of the earliest cases on record of intolerant persecution for opinion. Owing to a superstition of the time, his execution, which would have followed on the day after his trial, was deferred until the return of the sacred ship, which had only just started from Athens to Delos for the festival of Apollo. Until the return of the vessel it was considered unholy to put any person to death. Whilst thus awaiting the carrying out of his sentence, and contemplating his approaching *violent and premature death*, Socrates, in conversation with his friends, gave free expression to his views concerning death and immortality. He apparently believed that man was a dual being, consisting of body and soul, and his opinion was, that after death the soul of the good and wise would go to its like, and be with the gods. Socrates only states his views as the result of reflection. He does not affect to have found any proof or positive knowledge on the subject. These views of Socrates were reported by his youthful disciple Plato in the well known dialogue *Phædon*; but the beauty and perfection of the discussion there make it almost certain that most of its charm and literary polish must have been supplied by Plato himself. The force and variety of the reasonings of this dialogue have scarcely been surpassed, and, in another illustration I will now give you, viz., the reflections of the great Roman Stoic Cato, when about to destroy himself, you will see, that the pious Englishman Addison, writing in the prime of his manhood (in the year 1713) more than 2000 years after the death of Socrates, picturing in his tragedy of Cato the intense thoughts of that lofty mind, could find

nothing on the subject of immortality (apart from revelation) more powerful or impressive than those meditations of Plato,—

“Plato, thou reasonest well:—

“Else, whence this pleasing hope, this fond desire,

“This longing after immortality?

“Or, whence this secret dread and inward horror

“Of falling into naught? Why shrinks the soul

“Back on herself, and startles at destruction?

“’Tis the divinity that stirs within us,

“’Tis heaven itself that points out an hereafter,

“And intimates eternity to man.”

Sublime thoughts, sublimely expressed, but we are now considering whether they are anything more than the prompting of emotional and excited imagination.

Another instance of the thoughts of the human mind, when contemplating violent or premature death, I will select from Shakspeare—writing in about the 37th year of his age. In the famous soliloquy of Hamlet, with which most of you are familiar, the future life of the soul is adverted to in somewhat similar strains. Hamlet, contemplating suicide, is restrained by the apprehension of what may come after death, though he tries in vain to conclude that there is nothing.

“To die—to sleep—

“No more—

“To sleep! perchance to dream: aye, there’s the rub:

“For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

“When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

“Must give us pause.

* * * * *

“The dread of something after death,

“The undiscovered country, from whose bourne

“No traveller returns, puzzles the will.

* * * * *

“And thus the native hue of resolution

“Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,

“And enterprises of great pith and moment,

“With this regard, their currents turn away,

“And lose the name of action.”

Powerful poetry, yet, from the point of view of physiological science, no fallacy can be more obvious and superficial than the comparison of death to sleep. There is no real analogy whatever between them. Sleep is a palpable phase of life. It is a special state of the living brain and coursing blood. The senses only are in suspension and closed to external impressions, the heart and lungs being more or less active throughout. Diminished circulation of the blood through the brain is the vital characteristic of sleep, and only the stillness of the sleeper can have any real likeness to death, whose peculiar pallor resulting from the absence of life distinguishes it to the skilled observer at once from death. Then again to dream is a disturbed condition of sleep, and so is a function of the living organism, has indeed more of brain life in it than simple sleep, and, in point of fact, a dead man could no more dream than he could fly. The other remarkable and literally true part of my quotation from this famous soliloquy I shall have occasion to illustrate presently.

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* 'from this World to that which is to come' is another striking illustration of my argument. It was composed by him during the twelve years he was confined as a prisoner in Bedford jail, in the vigour of his life, daily expecting violent death, fully possessed, as he tells us, with the thought of death, and brooding over the future life that he believed would follow death.

We see then that the belief in immortality or future life is closely connected with the occurrence or expectation of *violent or premature death*, and, regarding the human organism from the stand-point of its physiology, and speaking morally, we may declare that human death occurring through violence or prematurely, or happening otherwise than through the natural organic decay of old age, is an improper event.

Now I have endeavoured to show you as an obvious

deduction from the indications which geological science has discovered of the scheme of creation, what is the general or ultimate cause of premature deaths in the organic World, viz., over-production of life, which seems to be physical nature's mechanical method of ensuring progress and improvement in the race.

“ So careful of the type she seems,
 “ So careless of the single life
 * * * * *
 “ So careful of the type? but no—
 “ From scarped cliff and quarried stone,
 “ She cries, a thousand types are gone,
 “ I care for nothing, all shall go.”

So much for physical nature—now let us make our appeal to the moral intelligence of man. In the course of the progressive evolution of man from his animal ancestry, through the growth and development of his brain and nervous system, a new power came into existence, or for the first time made its appearance on the Earth, in the form of the human intellect and moral sense; a power superior to mere physical nature, and capable, when exercised on reflection, of counteracting and controlling nature.

It was reserved for the benevolent Malthus (in his profound work on the effects on human happiness of the principle of population) to look physical nature in the face intellectually and morally as regards her production of man; to point out and to prove with overwhelming evidence that man was equally with lower organisms involved in her ruthless law of over-production, and to appeal to the intelligence of man himself, so far as his own existence was concerned, to exert his intellectual and moral faculties and powers to counteract the designs of mere mechanical nature, and emancipate his own life from the crushing effects of her inexorable organic law.

Malthus showed that in every age of the World, and

in all discovered countries, human beings had always multiplied beyond their means of subsistence, and that their excessive numbers had become reduced within, or to the level of such means of subsistence by the operation of various checks producing premature deaths ; which an able economist in his researches into bills of mortality had termed '*Nature's terrible correctives of the redundancy of mankind.*' These checks or terrible correctives were chiefly 'plague, pestilence and famine,' and now are the various diseases and fatal forms of pinching poverty that in more civilized countries have taken their place. In modern Europe, the plague, the sweating sickness, the black death and famine that decimated populations generations ago, have given place to the epidemics of typhoid and scarlet fever, diarrhœa, dysentery, cholera, diphtheria, pyæmia, lung consumption, heart degeneracy, and other 'the thousand shocks that flesh is heir to' even in our day, and which are pretty fully enumerated in this last annual report of the Registrar-General.

Now, what Malthus enunciated has never been generally understood or appreciated ; superstition and traditional prejudice have closed, and still close, the ordinary mind against its comprehension and reception. His theory did not deal with population in the abstract, or with the number of people in relation to extent of territory, but with the relative proportion between population and food. His proposition, which he demonstrated and proved up to the hilt, was this—That more people are everywhere found existing than there is comfortable means of subsistence for. This fact is even more clearly shown in the condition of countries where the inhabitants are comparatively few and scattered than in the most populous cities, so small are the means of subsistence in such sparsely peopled countries. Malthus showed that the poor and thinly inhabited tracts of the Scotch Highlands were more distressed by a redundant population than

many densely peopled districts. He showed conclusively that the real and ultimate cause of premature deaths is excessive births.

Now these astonishing truths, so clearly and powerfully enunciated and verified by Malthus, formed the groundwork of facts upon which the illustrious Charles Darwin, as he tells us, based his more astonishing theory of the origin of species, and the descent of Man.

If we look around us, unbiassed by superstition or prejudice, we cannot fail to see overwhelming proof of the operation of the Malthusian theory. The chief fact that strikes us is, that very few human beings even now live to attain to proper death. They are either born impregnated with the seeds of premature death, being bred from the unhealthy and unfit, or their subsequent lives of poverty, privation, overcrowding, overwork, worry, intemperance, vice, disease, hasten their dissolution, and bring them to untimely ends.

In a lecture I delivered here some few years ago on '*The Science of Life worth Living*,' I showed on the authority of the Registrar-General, corroborated by our versatile Vice-President, Dr. Richardson, that the normal length of life of a perfectly healthy human being would be about 100 years, but that the actual average length of life in this country did not exceed 50 years, whilst the average length of life of our toiling millions did not exceed 30 years!

Now, I am not claiming too much for the power of the human mind, or, to use Lord Bacon's expression, 'the kingdom of man,' when I declare that by the exercise of human intelligence premature deaths, with all their attendant superstitions, diseases, and miseries, might be stamped out. If we had a real sanitary science in lieu of what passes under that name, if our sanitarians, instead of expending their energies over nostrums for diminishing the death rate, would turn their reasoning faculties to-

wards the other end of nature's chain, and devise some moral means of diminishing the birth rate, this vast improvement in the condition of our social life might certainly be accomplished. If our sanitarians, recognising Nature's organic law of over-production of life, and its consequent fatal pressure of population against the limits of subsistence, would grasp the evil by the head, and not remain content to 'hold the eel of science by the tail,' they might easily sufficiently enlighten the community as to enable every reflecting person to perceive that, for a man with small means to marry improvidently, and recklessly incur himself or the community with a large family, ought to be regarded as a social offence, as it unquestionably is, a moral wrong.

Of the number of improvident marriages we have in this Report of the Registrar-General a very striking indication. During last year it appears that there were no less than 52,000 marriages of persons under 21 years of age, and these must have been mostly marriages of the poorer classes, for, in the table of the ages of persons at the time of marriage it appears that, whilst mechanics and working people marry at the average age of 25 years, the professional and independent classes do not marry until the average age of 31 years.

As a fact the marriages of men under age in Bethnal Green are about ten times as numerous as they are in St. George's, Hanover Square.

"We want," says that outspoken philanthropist Arnold White, "an enquiry into the effect of early and reckless marriages, and their connection with destitution—the creation of a healthy public opinion in respect to the responsibility of parents for children begotten by them. The unfit are propagated, and posterity plagued, if we ignore the stern conditions of natural law. If we would take due methods of stamping out heredity of evil, and of extending to man himself the consideration that has long

been given to improving the strain of dogs and the breeding of horses, the task of solving 'The Problems of a Great City'* would neither be so dark nor so difficult as it now is."

If only half the time our sanitarians spend in pottering over drain pipes were applied towards endeavouring to lessen the ever flowing stream of children pouring so recklessly from every class in the community, more especially from the wage-earning and indigent classes, a few years would bring marvellous relief from premature deaths, and the pauperism, privation, disease and misery that occasion and environ them.

Now it is a direct consequence of nature's law of population that the number of people at any time found existing in a particular Country is entirely dependent upon, and in strict correlation with the means of subsistence for the time being in that Country. If the number are found to decrease, or length of life to become shorter, as they have in fact done during some years past in Ireland, that is occasioned by the means of subsistence having become less in that Country, chiefly through the failure of the potatoe. If the number of people be found steadily increasing and length of life becoming longer, as they have done in England, that is occasioned by the means of subsistence having increased in our Country, chiefly through the inventions of science, freedom of trade and commerce, and security of capital owing to the strict maintenance of law and order. The sanitarians are not responsible for the decrease of the population and shortened life in Ireland, nor are they entitled to take all the credit for the increase and lengthened life of our population in England.

At the international Hygienic Congress at Vienna in the month of October last, our eminent Surgeon, Sir Spencer Wells, claimed for the sanitarians the fact of our

* Remington & Co., 1886.

population, and the average duration of life having so much increased during the last fifty years, and for the corresponding diminution in the death rate, and he went on to estimate the economical value of such increase, which he reckoned at eight millions sterling. I can't pretend to check his arithmetic, but, whatever value ensues from increased population, it can only arise from individuals who have lived to attain to manhood, or say twenty-one years of age, and Sir Spencer Wells' observations are very suggestive of the economical loss that must occur from the increase in the population of individuals who die under twenty-one years of age. In this metropolis alone the annual deaths are (in very round numbers) 85,000, and of these upwards of 40,000 are the deaths of individuals who have died in infancy, or without having lived to attain twenty-one years of age!

Try to compute the wasteful expense, the pain, grief, and misery connected with these 40,000 absolutely premature and untimely annual deaths, not only to the individuals dying in more or less agony, but to the lacerated feelings of bereaved parents and near relatives. Many now present have probably painful personal experience in their own families of one at least of such 40,000 cases in question.

In truth the superficial sanitary science of the present day has no scientific basis, and, in doing or teaching absolutely nothing to check or restrain the recklessness of excessive births, is, by its benevolently intended palliatives facilitating overcrowding and the multiplication of the unfit, tending to the survival of the weakest and worst of the community instead of the fittest, thereby to that extent intensifying competition, interminable toil and the sweating system, lowering wages, increasing poverty, swelling the number of the unemployed, and, in the long run, probably, in many cases, augmenting rather than diminishing the sum total of human misery!

There will undoubtedly arise, in a perhaps not distant future, a real Sanitary Science, which, recognising and obeying nature (to use Lord Bacon's far-seeing phrase) will command her, and then premature and untimely deaths will become eliminated, and man will ultimately only die when life and the love of life are satisfied, and his naturally exhausted constitution seeks its inevitable repose. His end will then be welcome, placid, and painless, and at last there will be realised, in a scientific sense, the saying that is written—

“O Death, where is thy sting?
O Grave, where is thy victory?”

For, the sting of death is disease, and the victory of the grave is premature or untimely death.

Now, if it be the fact, as I have suggested, that the expectation or longing for future life, or personal continuance after death, is connected with, and has originated from the occurrence of premature deaths, then we may expect that on the stamping out or cessation of such untimely deaths, the belief in immortality will also die out and cease.

I cannot now illustrate this proposition with any degree of fulness, but there are numerous instances in this country, as well as in others, of aged intelligent persons having left on record at their advanced ages their sentiments on the subject.

In the life of the late George Combe,* the eminent phrenologist and educationist, we have the views of Combe in his old age, and when contemplating death by the exhaustion of nature. He states that he had no belief in immortality or future individual life. He remarks: “Is not this intense longing after immortality in a state of bliss just a form of egotism? It appears to me to arise from the love of life, and self-love, and hope

* Macmillan & Co., 1878.

all combined. Since I reached my present frame of mind, my heaven has been the future progress of the human race in knowledge of God's laws, in obedience to them, and in virtue and happiness. I live in the future, and in this sense I already enjoy a glorious immortality. In point of fact, when I try to form a specific notion of my personal future existence, I am lost in contradictions. All my faculties are fashioned for the scene in which they now act, and I cannot conceive what they would do or feel in a sphere in which there was no matter, no ignorance to be removed, no intellectual problem to be solved, no suffering to be relieved, no justice to be performed. As I cannot comprehend this new state, I cease to take interest in it." Again, when parting from some young friends, he remarked: "I have had my day, and I rejoice to see them happy and active. I have no regrets in my mind at parting from them for ever, for the power of enjoyment is gone, and to me they are no longer objects of excitement, but of fatigue. How wisely is the way to the grave prepared to be trodden without a feeling of bereavement."

The late Charles Bray, the able author of 'The Philosophy of Necessity,' in his autobiography* thus expresses himself: "And now I have come very near to the end of the journey; I have exceeded the allotted term, the three score years and ten, and the question is, what is to come after the end. Is there any future state for me as an individual. I must say I have not the slightest hope or expectation of it nor, let me add, any wish for it. . . . Is there any reason whatever for supposing that death here is not really death, but only a change of scene? As Professor Huxley says, 'our sole means of knowing anything is the reasoning faculty which God has given us; and that reasoning faculty not only denies any conception of a future state, but fails to furnish a simple valid argu-

* Longmans, 1885.

ment in favor of the belief that the mind will endure after the dissolution of the body.' Hume also says, 'if any purpose of nature be clear we may affirm that the whole scope and intention of man's creation, so far as we can judge by natural reason, is limited to the present life.' I quite agree (says Bray) with Hume and Huxley." He adds, "So vague is the prospect (of a future life) that even the most religious people I have ever known seem in no hurry to begin the journey, and those who have been in preparation for this 'other and better world' all their lives will give their doctors any amount to keep them here another day, or even another hour." Writing some years later on and within three weeks of his death, Charles Bray says: "But my time has come, and in about a month in all probability it will be finished. From the nature of my disease there must be a gradual wasting of flesh and strength till the end comes. I shall get weaker and weaker, till the weary is at rest. . . . As to the question of the continued individuality in some other world after death, I have no hope or expectation or belief even in its possibility." He adds, "Holding these views regarding a future state, I think it my duty to proclaim them."

In the autobiography of Harriet Martineau* we meet with precisely the same sentiments as those held by George Combe and Charles Bray.

"It seems to me (she declared) that there is not only a total absence of evidence of a renewed life for human beings, but so clear a way of accounting for the conception . . . that I myself utterly disbelieve in a future life."

Only a month before her death, and in full view of its approach, she wrote, in a letter to her friend George Atkinson, "Now that the event draws near, and that I see how fully my household expect my death pretty soon,

* Smith Elder & Co., 1877.

the universe opens so widely before my view, and I see the old notions of death and scenes to follow to be so merely human—so impossible to be true when one glances through the range of science—that I see nothing to be done but to wait, without fear or hope or ignorant prejudice, for the expiration of life. I have no wish for further experience, nor have I any fear of it.”

Now let us take a further glance at the logic of death from the point of view of human physiology. To the eye of science death is simply the correlative of birth. Both are equally natural events in the life of an organism, and death is no more a calamity or a subject of dread than is birth. It is not a penalty, or the wages of sin. The most sinless innocent beings in creation have to undergo death as well as the most guilty. According to the universal law of organic life, every organism that once comes into healthy existence, and lives out its life free from external hindrance, is born, grows to maturity, declines, decays, and then dies. Death so occurring is not agonizing, nor, as our illustrations show, is it either dreadful, or suggestive of any further state of existence.

When people die, as it is often seen or said, ‘in full possession of their faculties,’ such a death is not proper, but untimely or premature; for full possession of the mental faculties is indicative of life, and not of death. It is simply evidence that the disease or cause which is occasioning such a death has not fatally affected or induced decay of the brain and nervous system. Now the faculties referred to in such cases are assumed to signify the soul, and the inference intended to be drawn is, that the body only is dying, and not the soul. We are now then brought into the presence of the most recent scientific discoveries in reference to what is commonly called the soul.

It was in the year 1796 that Francis Joseph Gall, a

physician of Vienna, arrested the attention of the medical world by the publication of his remarkable lectures on the anatomy and physiology of the brain and nervous system, in which it was for the first time distinctly pointed out, that the brain of man was a complex apparatus of organs, and that what were termed the mental or spiritual faculties were functions of those organs. Dr. Gall's startling ideas have since been so thoroughly followed up by observation and experiment, that it may now be accepted as established by physiological science that the so-called soul is the functional vital activity of the bodily organs of intelligence, the brain and nervous system, and that on the breaking up or dissolution of these organs by death, there is, so far as science can ascertain, nothing whatever left surviving for human individual existence elsewhere—Thus, it is now established by evidence, and assented to by scientists, that a functional relation exists between every fact of thinking, willing, or feeling on the one side, and some vibration, tremor, or molecular change in the brain on the other side; that is, a distinct correspondence between every process of thought or feeling and some corporeal phenomenon—observation, reflection, memory, imagination, judgment have all been analysed out and shown to be functions of a living organism;—that without a living nervous system there could be nothing like what we know as feeling: that without a living brain there could be nothing of what we know as thought or will.

Now we really observe something of all this in our every day experience, for, on the theological assumption, that, besides the body and its organs, and their physiological functions, man has a spirit within him, a separate entity called the soul; where, we may ask, is this soul, when, through the effect of vitiated blood on the brain, the man is overpowered from imbibing alcohol, or is insensible from a dose of opium, or when he is weighed

down with gloom and despondency to the verge of suicide, through derangement of his liver, or, when he is utterly unconscious under the influence of chloroform, or, when, from softening of the brain, he is reduced to mental imbecility, or when, from the small size of his brain, he is from birth to death an idiot? Dr. Gall established as a fact, to which there is no known exception, that when the human brain is so small that the horizontal circumference of the head does not exceed 15 inches, idiocy is the necessary consequence. What or where is the soul of an idiot? Every mental state is in fact a bodily state, a state of a living body, and cannot be shown to be existing after the body has ceased to live. Such is the explanation science gives concerning the so called soul. Of course science is confined to facts and rational inductions therefrom, and when we pass from facts and rational inferences we are in the region of imagination, which different minds will exercise according to their respective idiosyncracies.

We are then driven to regard the doctrine of immortality as a matter of personal aspiration and sentiment, there being no scientific proof whatever to be found in support of it—Even Bishop Butler, in his ably reasoned *Analogy*, rests belief in a future life upon probability, not upon proof. Notwithstanding all the brilliant discoveries that have so adorned this age of reason, we have at the present time no more evidence of immortality, or a life after death, than had the Grecian philosophers Socrates and Plato, the Roman orator Cicero, the myriad-minded Shakspeare, the great theologian Bishop Butler, or the accomplished christian Addison—This was very succinctly shown in a remarkable discussion on the subject of the soul and future life that appeared in the *Nineteenth Century Review* for the year 1877 to the details of which I can only now refer you.

In this still unproven state of the doctrine of immortality,

it is surely a matter deserving our serious consideration, whether we are rationally justified in regarding the future life as a condition so certain, and its expectation of such overwhelming interest, as to induce us to abandon or neglect the study and welfare of our social and moral life here, and to spend our spare time in the imaginary contemplation of another world, instead of using that spare time, and exerting all our intellectual and moral energies towards improving and enjoying earthly life, and removing the evils with which we are here surrounded, and in the midst of which we so painfully ‘live, and move, and have our being.’

Now you will not have failed to notice that I have made but slight reference to revelation, or the Gospel, which Christian theologians assure us, ‘brought immortality to light.’ I have expressly avoided its discussion, as being out of place in a purely secular discourse, as well as for the reason given to the King by Lord Bacon for discarding theology from his great philosophical work—‘On the dignity and advancement of the sciences.’ “If I treat of it,” said Bacon, “I shall have to step out of the bark of human reason, and enter into the ship of the church, which is only able by divine compass to rightly direct her course, and it will be meet therefore to keep silence on the subject.”

Pursuing our theme then within the domain of science, so happily defined by our late lamented lecturer Professor Clifford as “all-possible human knowledge, which can “rightly be used to guide human conduct,” let us briefly consider what has been the practical effect on our terrestrial life of belief in a future state of existence.

The theological dogma of human immortality, as a weapon in the hands of the church, has been wielded with atrocious and remorseless power. It instigated the tortures and burnings alive inflicted by the holy Inquisition. In this country it lighted up the fires of Smithfield.

It has been the source of sincere religious persecution wherever that has been practised. It has weakened real responsibility, for it has stood between our actions and their natural consequences. As a dogma it stands in the way of science now.

Speaking more generally I may affirm, it has deadened our sympathies for the earthly joys, affections, and sorrows of humanity, that the human mind has been disastrously diverted by it from seeking to discover and apply human remedies for the various evils and miseries that so sadly interfere with our love and enjoyment of earthly life; the doctrine in question impressing upon believers that this world is in a state of ruin, or under the curse, of no importance in comparison with the world that is to come, that we are here in a state of probation merely, that the various sorrows and miseries of life are sent for the purpose of our probation or trial whilst here, mysteriously dispensed by an inscrutable providence, and that we shall find compensation and recompense in a future life, where perfect distributive justice will prevail, and everything will in the end be set right. Some such ideal reflections as these have caused so many of the best of mankind to turn their thoughts away as much as practicable from the study and amelioration of the present life of this world, and to spend as much as possible of their leisure in contemplating, and preparing for the world of the future.

“ And enterprises of great pith and moment,
“ With this regard, their currents turn away,
“ And lose the name of action.”

On this our only leisure day of the week hundreds of thousands of rational human beings are passing hours in listening to exhortations and liturgies which, utterly ignoring this real present world, and its pressing mundane interests, its would-be delights and allurements,

are devoted entirely to an attempted realization of the ideal future world, and the means to be adopted for obtaining favourable admission there, prostrate in prayer and praise, rather than upright in the performance of the moral duties and right conduct which we owe to one another in our social and worldly intercourse. "Many a hundred sermons have I heard in England" (writes the historian Froude, in his eloquent address to the University of St. Andrews,)* "many a dissertation on the mysteries of the faith, on the divine mission of the clergy, on Apostolical succession, on bishops, and justification, and verbal inspiration, and the efficacy of the sacraments, but never one that I can recollect on common honesty, or those primitive commandments—"Thou shalt not lie, and Thou shalt not steal."

The deplorable extent to which the absorbing belief in a future world has biassed the very basis of our educational system, breeding a disregard, and contempt for, and neglect of the world in which we live, and where we are face to face with daily duties towards our fellow creatures, has, in truth, hardly ever been sufficiently dwelt upon.

Perhaps it may surprise many of you to hear that the clever and charming writer of some of the most powerful and popular novels of our day, the late George Eliot, held the most decided opinion upon the duty of mankind to study and improve our life on earth. One of her recent critics† has stated that "she held as a solemn conviction—"the result of a lifetime of observation—that in proportion as the thoughts of men and women are removed from the earth on which they live, are diverted from their own mutual relations and responsibilities, of which alone they know anything, to another world which can only be apprehended by belief, they are led to neglect

* Longmans, 1869.

† The Congregationalist, April, 1881.

“their duty to each other, to squander their strength in
“vain speculations, which can result in no profit to them-
“selves or their fellow creatures, which diminish their
“capacity for strenuous and worthy action, during a span
“of life brief indeed, but whose consequences will extend
“to remote posterity.”

It can hardly I think be doubted, that a general abandonment of the doctrine of immortality, by releasing our attention from being so absorbed in the contemplation of an imaginary future life, recalling and concentrating it in the real life upon our planet, would bring about a great amelioration of mortal existence. Poverty, privation, diseases, afflictions, and untimely deaths, supposed to emanate from the chastening hand of an Almighty, would be traced by our reason to secondary causes, removable by the application of human intelligence. Life on earth would be elevated morally to the duty of promoting happiness here, and the performance of that duty would be a main part of the greatest happiness of which rationally cultured human nature is susceptible.

Instead of so busying ourselves in divine service we should be employing all our energies in the service of man. And though death should be the end of the individual, it would not be the end of the good he may have done in life, nor would it deprive him of future fame. As, when we speak of the immortal Shakspeare, or the immortal Newton, we are not so much referring to the individual men, as we are thinking of their undying works, so by the records or the memory of the good and intellectual work a man may have done in his lifetime, and by the elevating influence of the moral example he may have left to those who come after him, distinguishing him from the brutes that perish, he may enjoy an immortality with posterity which would constitute for him a real world beyond the grave.

Looking forward to that real future world each one of

us may at least strive to realise the aspirations of George Eliot :—

“ Oh may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead, who live again
In minds made better by their presence.
So to live is heaven.

* * * * *

 This is life to come,
Which martyr'd men have made more glorious
For us who strive to follow. May I reach
That purest heaven, and be to other souls
That cup of strength in some great agony.

* * * * *

So shall I join that choir invisible
Whose music is the gladness of the world.”



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